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Linguistic Capital and the Production of Vernacular Digital Journalism: The Case of Malayalam-language News

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Abstract

The transition of vernacular language newspapers from print to digital formats has been largely overlooked in journalism studies. I suggest that studying this transition can help us better understand, from a production standpoint, the prevalence of both print and digital newspapers in the Global South. This article examines vernacular news production in the Global South by focusing on *Malayala Manorama* (*MM*), one of the most widely circulated Malayalam-language newspapers in both India and the Middle East. Using Bourdieu's notion of "linguistic capital," I unravel the technological and cultural challenges that *MM* faced during its transition from print to digital formats and the ways in which *MM* journalists addressed those impediments to produce online news in a multilingual media environment. Through multi-sited fieldwork, I argue that the journalistic accumulation and circulation of linguistic capital—alongside cultural, symbolic, and economic capitals—were crucial in overcoming the challenges of vernacular news production in the digital era. *MM* journalists developed language-specific fixes that were just as important as the broader technological advancements in the digital industry. Theoretically, this article demonstrates that the differentiation between cultural and linguistic capitals and the latter's deployment in journalism studies can enhance our understanding of vernacular news production.

Keywords: linguistic capital; Malayalam news; vernacular news media; *Malayala Manorama*; digital journalism history; Global South

Introduction

Across the world, news has begun to be increasingly produced and consumed in digital formats. This trend is especially evident in much of the Global North where the increased dependence on digital formats for news has paved the way for the decline of traditional news media such as print and television (Lipka and Shearer, 2023; Newman et al., 2023). In comparison, in the Global South, both digital and traditional news media have generally experienced growth, although it is the latter that tends to have a superior reach due to the lack of audience access to digital infrastructures such as electricity, computers, and the Internet (Harindranath and Gomez-Cruz, 2023). The problem is sometimes also exacerbated by production-related challenges associated with the digitalization of vernacular languages, which are central to much of the region's journalistic output.[1] For example, whereas issues pertaining to scripting and Search Engine Optimization have not constituted limiting factors in producing online news in dominant languages like English, they have presented difficulties in comparatively minor, vernacular Indian languages such as Malayalam. How have vernacular journalists navigated these barriers in representing the written word in the digital realm? To address this overarching question, this article illuminates the technological, and more importantly, cultural and linguistic strategies used by vernacular journalists to package and produce digital news.

Bourdieu's concept of "linguistic capital" is useful for examining the cultural work of vernacular news production. It refers to the "capacity to produce expressions à propos, for a particular market" (Thompson, 1991, p. 18). As such, the concept of linguistic capital has been under-utilized in journalism studies not only because of the relatively greater usage of the broader Bourdieusian term "cultural capital" but also due

to the academic field's continued preoccupation with Euro-American research topics, which typically prioritize economic or political themes at the expense of cultural dimensions such as language.[2] I seek to make a modest contribution to our understanding of the ways in which the cultural, in particular the linguistic, aspects become central to journalism practice.

This article presents a case study of Malayalam-language journalists producing online news for a migrant audience in the Middle East. The Malayalam-speaking population inhabiting the southern Indian state of Kerala has historically been a source of migrant labor for the growing economies of the Middle East, and online news is one of the principal ways migrants connect with their homeland. I specifically study online journalists from *Malayala Manorama* (hereafter, *MM*), one of the most widely circulated Malayalam-language newspapers in both India and the Middle East (Arab Media Outlook, 2015; Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2023).[3] Through interviews and multi-sited fieldwork, I unravel the practices that *MM* journalists adopt to overcome the technological and cultural limitations of vernacular language news production in a multilingual media environment dominated by Arabic- and English-language journalists.

Linguistic Capital in Journalism Studies

Media sociologists commonly perceive linguistic capital as part of the larger "cultural capital." The latter encompasses things such as educational credentials and artistic abilities (Benson and Neveu, 2005). However, I suggest that, depending on the particular object of study, it may be useful to separate cultural capital from linguistic capital and to deploy the latter explicitly for a more effective mapping of forces that impinge on media production as a social process—one of the core aims for which Bourdieu proposed different types of capitals in the first instance. His idea of the

"economic capital," for example, refers to financial resources that could be converted into money. "Symbolic capital" represents "accumulated prestige or honour" (Thompson, 1991, p. 14). Capital is thus regarded as a surrogate for power. Although a news media outlet may attempt to maximize both cultural and economic power or capitals, the social world is typically structured around the opposition of these two forms of capital, with economic capital, overall, being more powerful in Bourdieu's scheme. One exception to this structure, Bourdieu (1996) asserts, is the arena of "cultural production"—which I posit includes vernacular news production to a certain degree—as it is characterized by low levels of economic capital and high levels of cultural and linguistic capital.

The different types of capital correspond to the diversity and volume of resources owned by participants in the "field," such as journalists (blinded). Bourdieu (2005) defined a "field" as a system of social positions structured by interacting power relationships. His field theory portrays modernity as a process of differentiation into semiautonomous and increasingly specialized fields of action, such as the fields of politics, economics, religion, and cultural production (Benson, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Journalism can also be considered a field when it defines its own rules and patterns of understanding and writing about the world as different from those of the fields of politics, religion, and literature (Chalaby, 1996; 1998). Journalism is a field when its practitioners have their own skills, myths, and values (Neveu, 2007). The journalistic field's "mediating" role—its unique mandate to engage with other fields, and then publicly disseminate its findings—allows it to influence the relations of power in contemporary societies (Benson, 1999).

Within the field of journalism, key players—journalists, editors, and newspaper staff—strive to maximize their capital (Bourdieu, 2011). The structure of capitals

enables one type of capital to be traded for another, although in unequal proportions, and therefore necessitates an examination of the "contrasted profitability in different fields" (Neveu, 2007, p. 337). A more general way to represent the societal division between economic and cultural/linguistic capitals, as described by Benson (1999), is through considering the field as structured around two opposing poles: the "heteronomous" pole, representing economic and political capital (forces external to the field), and the "autonomous" pole, indicating the specific capital unique to that field (e.g., artistic, scientific, or other variations of cultural capital such as linguistic capital). Within this scheme, the journalistic field as a field of large-scale production is situated closer to the heteronomous pole of economic and political power. This proximity to the heteronomous pole may explain the privileging of economic and political, over cultural, dimensions in the study of news production in the Global North within journalism studies literature. Likewise, a concept such as linguistic capital becomes more viable for the study of vernacular media, including Malayalam-language news media, owing to their closeness to the autonomous pole.

It is thus this relational aspect of Bourdieu's formulation that distinguishes it from institutional theory (Powell and DiMaggio, 2012) or the ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 2012) because the last two suggest static organizations and frozen structures, making the idea of linguistic capital an appropriate conceptual rubric for the study of vernacular media. The relational feature is also instructive in a multilingual media environment. As Bourdieu's framework does not assign media players to mutually exclusive linguistic categories, it retains the possibility of exchange across different language communities. This characteristic is specifically important to my case study as the news media in Malayalam, English, and Arabic languages in the Middle East "refer to one another in a shared field of news" (Udupa, 2015, p. 95), even though

the idea of *distinction* between them is maintained. The efficacy of a concept such as linguistic capital thus lies in its "epistemological and performative" functions—in the ways in which the distinction between various language media serves as a mode of knowing, experiencing, and reporting the lived realities through the practice of journalism.

The Vernacular Press and Malayalam-language News in the Digital Age

The vernacular press in India continues to thrive in the digital age. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (2023), among the top 30 newspapers with the highest circulation in India, only two are published in English, while the rest are printed in vernacular languages. Along with Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi, and Bengali dailies, Malayalam newspapers possess a dominant hold on India's press landscape. Despite the preponderance of vernacular newspapers, English-language newspapers, such as the *Times of India* and *Hindustan Times*, are overrepresented in Indian journalism studies scholarship (e.g., Fadnis, 2022; Relly and Schwalbe, 2013). Therefore, another goal of my study is to address this research gap by focusing on the Malayalam-language press, in particular, *MM*, the newspaper with the second-highest circulation in India (Audit Bureau of Circulations).[4]

As such, major newspapers in India launched their online editions between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, with the marked increase in the penetration of the Internet and mobile phones (Jeffrey and Doron, 2013). During this period, at *MM*, digital operations sharpened the focus on hyper-local news. *MM* collaborated with the mobile phone company Nokia in 2005 to develop an on-device portal for Malayalam-language news. More recent innovations included an Apple Watch application and an Amazon Echo product (Aneez et al., 2016). *MM* digital content producers predominantly sourced news stories from the print editions and *Manorama News*, *MM*'s

24-hour broadcast news channel, which was established in 2006. *MM*'s online team also produced news content for its English-language website, *Onmanorama*, catering to the Kerala diaspora population across the world.

Currently, 90 percent of the global Kerala diaspora of 2.4 million live in the Middle East and contribute about USD 14 billion to India—more than a quarter of the country's total remittances (Kathiravelu, 2015; Rajan and Zachariah, 2019). And yet, this population, along with its cultural and media practices, remains largely overlooked in migration studies. As Kathiravelu notes, the relationship between India and the contributors of overseas capital "has primarily been limited to how NRIs [non-resident Indians] in North America and Europe maintain connections with the home country" (p. 259). Thus, both migration studies and journalism studies have lagged in examining the current and historical developments related to Kerala's migrant population in the Middle East.

Reflecting the growing demand for vernacular content among Kerala's migrant population, the turn of the twenty-first century witnessed the establishment of Malayalam-language newspapers and broadcast media in the Middle East, with *Gulf Madhyamam* being the first daily to be published, in 1999, from Bahrain (blinded). Asianet Radio was launched in 2000 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Asianet television operations in 2003. Although *MM* shipped daily its print edition from Kerala to the Middle East since the 1970s and thus made it available—two to three days after publication—to the readers, it was not until 2005 that the newspaper established a news bureau in Dubai and started five Middle Eastern editions. In addition to Dubai, the newspaper is currently published in the Middle East from Manama (Bahrain) and Doha (Qatar). *MM*'s overseas editions continue to work closely with the newspaper headquarters in Kottayam, Kerala for reporting, editing, content layout, and publishing.

Between 2006 and 2016, more than five Malayalam satellite television channels have developed exclusive Middle East operations to "cater to the imagination of the homeland and the search for one's roots by recreating the life in India for diasporic consumption" (Mini, 2016, p. 181). Malayalam-language news portals such as *Marunadan Malayali* have gained popularity, particularly among younger audiences. However, in recent years, four Malayalam-language radio stations have ceased operations in the UAE because of a "drop in advertisement revenue" and "high licence fee" (Kader, 2019). One of the closed stations was *MM* company's Radio Mango 96.2 FM. Considering these mixed developments, one can hypothesize that *MM* newspaper's continued presence in the Middle East is warranted not so much by economic capital as by a combination of symbolic, cultural, and linguistic capitals.[5] With this configuration, I posit two interrelated research questions to address the central aims of this study as outlined earlier in this article: First, what technological challenges in the journalistic field has *MM* faced in reaching its migrant readership in the Middle East? Second, how have *MM* and its journalists leveraged the different types of capitals, particularly linguistic capital, to counter those challenges and produce online news?

Method and Study Exploration

Given the lack of published research on Malayalam-language online news, this exploratory study adopted a qualitative approach to address the two research questions. I completed semi-structured telephone interviews in the Malayalam language with migrant journalists in July-August 2021. These interviews were informed by prior fieldwork in Kerala from November 2017 to February 2018, and in the Middle East in June-July 2016. In total, 38 current or former *MM* reporters were interviewed for this study, which is part of a larger research project on Indian journalists. To gain a more holistic perspective, I also interviewed six *MM* migrant readers, ranging from "devout"

to "occasional" readers of the newspaper. Before and during the fieldwork, I daily perused *MM* news stories on the Web and the mobile app, enabling me to ask informed questions to the interviewees. While more than half a dozen women worked as journalists and sub-editors in *MM* headquarters in Kottayam, there were no women at *MM*'s Middle Eastern offices. As a result, most interviews were conducted with male journalists.

All interviews were recorded using an Android mobile phone and transferred to a secure external drive. In addition, I jotted down notes during the interviews. These notes contained descriptions of the interview space and key points from the interviews. Interviews were later transcribed and translated from the Malayalam language to English. These transcriptions were collated and systematically organized in a Word document, a kind of personal workbook, to display interviewees' utterances along with their contexts. Following Esterberg (2002), I moved "back and forth between inductive and deductive reasoning" (p. 8) while reading and re-reading the transcripts. Qualitative researchers, according to Strauss and Corbin (1990), are "concerned with accurate description, when doing their analysis and presenting their findings. Because the investigator cannot possibly present all the data en toto to the readers, it is necessary to reduce these data. The principle here is to present an accurate description of what is being studied…" (pp. 21-22). I thus read across different documents, including field notes, news stories, and theoretical propositions, to decipher connections and discover emergent themes from the field data. As Esterberg suggests, the "research process is an ongoing dialogue between theoretical concerns and empirical evidence" (pp. 8-9). I also inspected the interviewees' attitudes, beliefs, and practices in transcripts, situating them critically within the larger political and cultural environment and keeping in mind that they both shaped each other. Metaphors, word choices, and linguistic devices that were

repetitively used to illustrate informants' feelings and experiences associated with work and personal life in the Middle East were analyzed to study potential links with relevant concepts, such as linguistic capital.

Throughout this analysis, I was guided by Kumar's (2005) recommendation that the purpose of theory is not to reduce, as it does so often in academic writing, but to enlarge and make the narrative accessible to broader audiences. It was crucial for me to humanize the subjects, enliven the settings in which interviews were conducted, and shed at least some light on the subjects' lives, both professional, and in some relevant cases, personal. Simultaneously, I remained committed to protecting their identities. The names of the informants in the following sections have therefore been altered even as I attempt to preserve some of their diverse personas, as common in ethnographically inspired writings. Admittedly, this exercise may result in the analysis becoming somewhat descriptive. In the age of digital technologies and big data, Benson (2014) has called this "new descriptivism," a widespread tendency of more and more research offering detailed descriptions, but no explanations. My study is informed by Benson's critique. At the same time, however, I consider that a culturally situated description of the workings of vernacular news media in the Global South is not only sorely missing in digital journalism studies, but that an accurate and "critical description is in itself a mode" of scholarly analysis, as Mukharji (2016) clarified.

When Vernacular Turns Digital

Challenges in the journalistic field of Malayalam-language news production are frequently discussed in media institutions such as *MM* and the Calicut Press Club, which offers a postgraduate diploma degree in Communication and Journalism. Kurien, a former *MM* migrant journalist who now resides in the suburbs of Kozhikode, Kerala, was a regular participant in these discussions, even after his retirement. I met him at the

Calicut Press Academy, where we suggested we meet—possibly because of a workshop being held there or perhaps to spare me the "inconvenience" of traveling to his distant home. The Academy, located in the heart of the city and near my temporary residence, was a convenient choice. The gray-colored building of the Press Academy stood like a sentinel, watching the figures who entered and exited the premises every now and then. Periodic breaks from work seemed inevitable, given the abundance of teashops selling *chai* and snacks at a stone's throw from the Academy. When Kurien arrived at the chosen hour of the day, I was waiting for him at the reception. We shook hands, and I introduced myself. He proposed that we go to the studio room on the third floor where I could ask him "anything under the sun." Kurien oversaw the impact of digital technologies in *MM* newsrooms during his final years as an *MM* journalist. For more than three decades, he worked as a journalist in Kerala for several newspapers, including *MM*, and also served as a migrant journalist in *MM*'s Dubai newsroom for a couple of years in the late 1990s.

MM has been able to utilize its linguistic capital to progressively overcome technological challenges in publishing Malayalam-language news, particularly for its Middle East editions. After the advent of print technologies in Kerala in the 1800s, *MM* acquired and imported a Hopkinson and Cope printing press from London, capable of legibly publishing Malayalam script, which originally comprised 800 characters. A local craftsman was hired to create Malayalam type for the printing press. *MM*'s founding editor, Kandathil Varghese Mappillai, a proponent of the Malayalam language, later modified the script to reduce the number of typographic characters by half (Manorama Online, 2019). These early innovations shaped *MM*'s publishing trajectory. About a century later, for the Middle East editions, if the initial challenges in the journalistic field pertained to the speed of delivering print newspapers across the

Indian Ocean, which depended on transportation technologies, more recent obstacles lay at the confluence of digital technologies and the Malayalam language script. For example, standard keyboards did not support Malayalam letters. A customized keyboard was therefore developed to solve the issue. In the late 1980s, IBM introduced computers for desktop publishing, which enhanced the use of the Malayalam language for digital applications (Wilson, 2019). A decade later, Malayalam-language news was embedded within the print news cycle, and there was no separate team for managing online news. "Print news was simply reproduced in the online format in a nominal way," explained Kurien. The print editions were also made available in an online format, a practice that continues to this day.

There were mixed feelings about revenue generation—accumulating economic capital—from *MM*'s digital editions. *MM* does not have a paywall for online news, and readers can access online Malayalam-language news for free, even though, in the long run, *MM* plans to monetize the digital newspaper. "On the Internet you can read news free of cost. This is only for starters, though, and we hope to generate revenue from online editions," commented Kurian. To be sure, *MM* was generating revenue from its online editions through Google advertisements even in the 2000s, when the website was in its formative stages. However, there were technical limitations, as Kurien highlighted: "Google ads had limitations because Malayalam was incompatible with English. Ads should be related to content on a page. But that was not possible because the language was different and so the readers were not very interested."

In the early days of the Internet in India, it was difficult to send Malayalam-language content through email. Consequently, the distribution of content from the Kerala diaspora population in the US and the Middle East to *MM* headquarters in Kottayam was not smooth. With time, as the technology improved, these problems were

largely addressed. Online editions are constantly being revamped in terms of design and staff such as content writers, noted Kurien. According to Jayadev, a former *MM* journalist now working for Asianet television, "*Manorama* could foresee the change from traditional journalism to mojo [mobile journalism], and they have made a big investment in digitalization." Indeed, smartphones have increasingly become a primary platform for Malayalam-language news, and *MM* has adapted by designing customized mobile fonts. Kurien recalled that mobile news became more popular among Malayalam-speaking population around 2014. Before that, users had to download fonts onto their computers or mobile phones to read Malayalam-language content. *MM* used its own customized font for the first few years. However, it was challenging to search for Malayalam-language content because of functional issues with Search Engine Optimization. These technical impediments made *MM* switch to Malayalam Unicode font, which was developed in 2002. This transition improved the production and accessibility of Malayalam news, optimizing the digital experience for both migrant and native audiences.

Digital innovations at *MM* are handled by a separate organizational unit called Manorama Online. One of its managers, Mathew, proudly introduced it by saying, "Two and a half decades ago, when Google was yet to be born, when Indians flaunted pagers…the Malayala Manorama group hit the online world with the launch of Manorma Online website in 1997." However, digital news production is not conceived as an entirely different journalistic enterprise at *MM*. For example, there is no physical convergence between digital and print news teams, with each operating from different floors at the *MM* headquarters in Kottayam. In terms of management structure, digital and print news teams operate along parallel lines. Members from the print and digital news teams typically do not get to interact much with each other at the workplace.

Digital developments have also heightened the significance of hyperlocal news, as the following quote from Kurien illustrates:

> People are interested in online news district-wise. So someone from the Malappuram district would be more interested in news from Malappuram. And then people have preferences for news from Kozhikode, Ernakulam, and Kottayam. There is also interest in politics—there has been talk about proxy voting and all. And then there are people in the Gulf [Middle East] belonging to different political parties. People from Kerala are more politically conscious than from, say, Gujarat and other states of North India.

If before the 1990s, the sole edition that a "Malayali" (someone who speaks Malayalam) migrant read was the main Kottayam-based edition, today a reader could choose from any edition from Kerala or the Middle East. The proliferation of hyperlocal news has been one of the upshots of digital developments, particularly at a time when people have access to multiple sources of information and rely on major news outlets such as *Al Jazeera* and the *BBC* for international news. *MM* also uses Google Analytics, Chartbeat, and Site Catalyst to monitor the web performance of its news stories. For the Middle East editions, the newspaper relies on third-party tools such as Comscore Digital Analytix for sales and marketing. According to Kurien, *MM* keeps an eye on metrics, even at the level of individual news stories. "Entertainment and cinema stories have more readership. But we don't just give sensational news; instead, we try to balance everything. We care for all types of readers," he clarified.

As digital developments progressively gain traction at *MM*, a topic of persistent debate at its Kottayam headquarters is what digital journalism studies scholars such as Meese and Hurcombe (2021) and Van Dijck et al. (2018) term "platform dependencies."

This refers to news media organizations' reliance on digital platforms such as social media, search engines, and news aggregators for audience traffic and news distribution (Pyo, 2022). In the case of *MM*, as part of its "social media strategy," the newspaper has partnered with YouTube and Facebook for content dissemination through applications such as Facebook Live videos. However, these overtures also pose the risk of diverting audiences to these platforms, reducing direct engagement with *MM*'s website. The challenge, then, is to bring the "traffic back to the website," a goal *MM* continues to pursue. *MM* regularly plans local activities such as medical camps, local award shows, and campus film festivals to increase brand visibility (Aneez et al., 2016). However, these activities aimed at gaining symbolic capital have been largely confined to Kerala, while audience engagement in the Middle East occurs more at the individual journalist level than through formal institutional initiatives.

It is, furthermore, important to emphasize the complementarity between digital and print news at *MM*—a phenomenon that is not uncommon in the Global South more broadly—despite the disparate organizational arrangements. This dynamic is aptly captured in the words of Kurien:

> With regard to [*Malayala*] *Manorama*, and Malayalam media more generally, decline of the print has not yet happened. For the next 10 years, no problems in Malayalam. For example, with the advent of online editions there were predictions that print will go down. But those predictions in our context were not true. Philip Meyer said that by 2044 there won't be any print newspaper in the world—that won't be possible. These predictions are not true and as such predictions have been made earlier, in different eras. When photography came, there was a similar buzz, but nothing happened. So I suspect that print is going to stay,

> although it may not be the most important source of news. Some think that social media, without gatekeepers, will be free. But readers like media with gatekeepers because somebody must be there to say what is good and what is bad. Without that it's impossible to know the truth. For example, in the comments section of online stories, it's not important that you get 1000 comments because you can't see what people commented, and may be, the most important comment is lost. So such dialogue has no meaning. And what democracy is that? What public information does it have?

One difference in print news readership between Kerala and the Middle East is that, unlike in the former where news is mainly consumed in the morning hours, most readers in the Middle East keep up with print news in the evening, after they return from work. "In Kerala, almost every home subscribes to newspapers, and with morning tea or coffee people read each and every news in detail. In Dubai, for example, people just skim through the headlines and read the news they think is interesting," said Kurien, adding that, "In Dubai offices, in the first half an hour everyone finishes reading." Many offices in the Middle East with a significant Malayali population subscribe to *MM* and migrants read the newspaper in the office. In addition to print news, the circulation of online news content happens throughout the day, though it is to a certain extent dependent on class: white-collar workers can read and share news from the workplace, whereas blue-collar workers, such as those in construction industries, have limited time to engage with news.

Even then, mobile news consumption happens in short bursts of time—a practice conceptualized as "news snacking" by digital journalism studies scholars such as Molyneux (2018) and Bucy et al. (2014). In the case of *MM*, for example, one of the

readers interviewed for this study mentioned that "In Kerala, there is time and facility for reading newspapers early in the morning. In the UAE, Malayalis must come to work and earn money so they cannot read newspapers first thing in morning, like in Kerala," adding that, "so they use the intervals in their work to read a newspaper." In comparison to online newspapers, print editions encourage more sustained engagement with news. Door delivery of Malayalam-language print newspapers, such as *MM*, continues to drive circulation in the Middle East as in Kerala. Migrant workers living in labor camps primarily read newspapers on weekends (Fridays and Saturdays), often sharing a single copy among multiple readers. Together, print and digital news in the Middle East reach Malayali migrants across different class backgrounds.

Linguistic Capital as a Foundation for Migrant Journalism

If Kuttappan preferred writing longhand, it seemed even more important for him to write in the Malayalam language. His daily routine included spending a couple of hours in the morning at his writing desk. At a time when the English language was gaining popularity over Malayalam, especially among younger generations, he remained a staunch defender of the Malayalam language. Kuttappan ascribed the centrality of the Malayalam language to the very meaning of what it meant to be a Malayali in a globalizing world. An increasing number of Malayali migrants in the Middle East have been embracing English-language news on digital and print platforms. Yet, he insisted that people still have a "mental connection with Malayalam" and they continue to read in the Malayalam language, in some cases even "migrating to Malayalam" altogether. Another *MM* migrant journalist in the Middle East, Vasudevan, emphasized the role of the Malayalam language when he said, "We think in Malayalam, so therefore people find more comfort when they read news in Malayalam, even though they may speak English."

Language-based solidarities are an integral component of news production, particularly at a juncture when the English language is increasingly becoming the lingua franca for native and migrant populations from Kerala. The standardized Malayalam language that journalists use in writing *MM* news stories acts as a glue for a migrant population otherwise fractured along religious lines. A close reading of news stories in *MM* shows that modern-day Malayalam still reflects, through its use of Sanskritized Malayalam, the vestiges of a higher caste culture. However, the extent of caste- and religion-inflected language features has relatively decreased since the beginning of the twentieth century. The standardization of Malayalam due to the proliferation of mass media and printing technologies helped reduce loan words from different languages—these included, as Arunima (2006) noted, English, Syriac, Latin, and Portuguese in the Christian dialect; Arabic and Urdu in the Muslim dialect; and Sanskrit in the Brahmin and higher caste dialect. News in standardized Malayalam was thus able to cast its reach across a broad swathe of the population. *MM*'s linguistic capital is thus essential in creating a pan-Malayali identity, particularly in a foreign land where a part of the migrant identity is defined in contradistinction to Arab and Western identities. By staking claim to this distinctive, yet coherent, Malayali character, Malayalam-language news resonates with migrant readers. Given that Malayalam-language newspaper reading is a characteristic of Malayali life back in Kerala, tales of Malayali migrants searching for news frequently surfaced in my interviews, as a couple of sample passages indicate:

> I recently interviewed a person who has lived in Gulf [the Middle East] for more than 40 years. He reached the UAE by ship. He told me that during that time also Malayalis in Dubai were very attached to

> Malayalam newspapers. They used to get newspaper once in a week. Everyone in the camp used to assemble to read the newspaper. (Harish)

> M. Mukundan who is a famous Malayali writer wrote a novel called *Pravasam* ("Migrant Life"). In that novel, he depicts a scene where a Malayali migrant in the Gulf [the Middle East] searches for a newspaper so that he can while away his time as he is in the toilet since in Kerala he is habituated to reading newspaper in toilet! This shows how attached Malayali life is to newspapers. (Justin)

In addition to the formal level, the Malayalam language exerts its influence on news-making and reading at a referential level. Because Arabic- and English-language news media are indexed to Middle Eastern and expatriate populations, Malayalam-language news exclusively associates itself with Kerala. For example, Martin, an *MM* reporter with journalism experience in the Middle East, commented on the lifeworld of a typical Malayali migrant: "Malayalis live as Malayalis there [in the Middle East]. They live with Malayalis and read Malayalam news publications. They always maintain a distance with the Gulf natives." Malayalam news, in particular *MM*, thus becomes a site where Malayali migrant readers and journalists come together as an "imagined community"—a community that is formed as much through a common language (Malayalam) as in *distinction* to the Arabic and English languages. In addition to Western expatriates, the English language is referenced to Malayalis who, by virtue of their superior class and mobility status, identify more as expatriates than as Malayali migrants.

A case in point is James. At the time of my fieldwork, he worked for an English-language newspaper in Doha. In his early fifties, James had completed his master's at the City University of London before pursuing a career in English-language journalism in the Middle East. Unlike most interviewees, James considered himself more an "Indian" than a Malayali, perhaps an outgrowth of his time spent in the UK. "I don't read Malayalam newspapers. I go online and see what is happening in India," he quipped when I asked him about his newspaper reading habits. His social circle in Doha consisted not of Malayali migrants but of expatriates, including some of his journalist colleagues. "I don't have direct contact with the Malayali community," he remarked.

Although James may exemplify the quintessential Indian expatriate, some members of the Malayali community straddled the line between migrant and expatriate: business professionals, doctors, and engineers. Many of them consumed both Malayalam- and English-language news. However, *MM*, and by extension, other Malayalam-language newspapers in the Middle East such as *Gulf Madhyamam* and *Varthamanam*, appealed the most to the "average" Malayali migrant accustomed to reading news in private or social settings in Kerala. Malayalam-language news in *MM* was malleable enough to accommodate the interests of a wide range of readers who in turn deduced different values, meanings, and gratifications from the newspaper. Malayalam-language news served as a lens through which Malayali migrants discussed and debated political developments in the homeland. In this way, language embodied, as Sahana Udupa claimed in the case of Kannada-language news media, "the interlinked aspects of cultural distinctness, perceptions of temporal primacy, intimate address and inextricable connections with formal politics…" (p. 27). Likewise, the Malayalam language provided a vocabulary to engender discussions about political and civic life, a longstanding characteristic of the Malayali population (Panikkar, 2015). As news-

writers and cultural insiders wielding linguistic capital, journalists such as Kuttappan viewed promoting and developing the Malayalam language as their primary task.

Notably, *MM* has also used its linguistic capital to produce English-language news content. As primary and secondary-school education in the English language receives greater emphasis in India—and remains the preferred language of instruction for Indians in the Middle East—the younger generation of Malayali natives and migrants is becoming increasingly bilingual. In response to these developments, *MM* has launched its English-language website, *Onmanorama*, which is geared toward English-speaking Malayalis, particularly those residing in the US, the UK, and the Middle East. Moreover, *MM*'s senior staff members have recognized the importance of English, given their own exposure to the language through their educational and professional pursuits. For example, *MM*'s editor-in-chief was trained at one of India's leading institutions, St. Stephens College, Delhi University, and worked for English-language newspapers such as the *Oklahoma City Times* in the US and *The Sunday Times* in the UK before assuming editorial responsibilities at *MM*. His daughter, *MM*'s CEO, earned a management degree from Carnegie Mellon University. This aggregation of cultural and linguistic capitals through overseas education and work experience has enabled *MM*'s senior leadership to shape key operational and strategic decisions, such as investing in English-language content for a newspaper traditionally regarded as the torchbearer of the Malayalam language (Arunima, 2006b).

The most prominent impact of *MM*'s expansion into English-language content is seen in digital spaces, in particular on social media and mobile platforms. Because digital media are the principal modes of news engagement for the younger Malayali generation, *MM* translates news from Malayalam to English through a team based in Kottayam. Original news content is produced only in Malayalam, except for tweets,

which are relayed in both Malayalam and English from the @manoramaonline and @Onmanorama handles. To give an indication of the popularity of these Twitter accounts, @manoramaonline had 256.9K followers and @Onmanorama 25K. Based in Kerala, *MM*'s social media team regularly tweets news stories from these accounts, which are then retweeted by readers, increasing the "spreadability" of news (Jenkins, 2008). In addition, my interviewees reported that a growing number of readers in the Middle East were consuming news on smartphones. *MM* has a mobile app that can be customized for receiving news in Malayalam or English. Touting itself as the "most popular" mobile app available in Malayalam, it includes a news alert function, which aligns with *MM*'s digital strategy that "news should travel to the reader" (Mathew).

Conceptually, these bilingual developments at *MM* aptly demonstrate the utility of the relational aspect in Bourdieu's approach. Instead of straitjacketing language communities into rigid categories or binaries, the Bourdieusian framework allows for pragmatic exchanges between them. At the same time, this "relational mode of existence" (Udupa, 2015, p. 95) helps articulate the distinctions in the journalistic field—differences that, in the case of vernacular news production in the Middle East, are based not only on class, caste, and nationality, but also on language, specifically English, Arabic, and Malayalam. It is thus the potential to balance the distinctions and synergies among the meaning-making structures that makes Bourdieu's concepts pertinent to the study of vernacular news production in a multilingual environment.

Conclusion

This article has examined vernacular language as an arena for systematic analysis of digital journalism in the Global South. It specifically described the technological challenges that the Malayalam-language newspaper *MM* encountered in its transition from print to digital formats and the ways in which the publication

addressed those impediments to produce online news for its migrant audience. A host of challenges in the journalistic field emerge when vernacular languages intersect with digital technologies. As this study illustrated, *MM* witnessed problems with the transcription and retrieval of Malayalam-language words and phrases in the digital space because of its non-standard script. *MM* resolved these issues through a combination of in-house linguistic innovations and broader technological advancements in the digital industry.

One approach to understanding these language-related developments in journalism practice is through the notion of linguistic capital—a Bourdieusian concept that this article has operationalized to study the production of vernacular online news. I argue that the journalistic accumulation and circulation of linguistic capital, alongside cultural, symbolic, and economic capitals, are crucial to vernacular news production. Demarcating linguistic capital from the broader cultural capital and purposefully deploying the former accords a more robust framework to interpret vernacular digital journalism. In the case of Malayalam-language news, for example, the aggregation of linguistic and other capitals among media players enables us to flesh out with greater precision the everyday workings of digital journalism and how news media institutions, such as *MM*, counter technological challenges within different linguistic markets.

The idea of separating cultural and linguistic capitals for operationalizing the latter, while new in digital journalism studies, is not unprecedented in the social sciences. In fact, Bourdieu (1991) himself regards linguistic capital as constituting cultural capital but differentiates the two for analytical clarity, as he states: "The laws of the transmission of linguistic capital are a particular case of the laws of the legitimate transmission of cultural capital…" (p. 61). Therefore, this article proposes the explicit

application of linguistic capital alongside cultural capital to enhance explanatory power in studying vernacular news.

Importantly as well, the relational aspect embedded in a concept like linguistic capital helps explain two distinct, yet overlapping, practices in vernacular news production, as evidenced in the case of *MM*: on the one hand, journalists routinely utilized their linguistic capital to appeal to the Malayalam-language sentiments and cultural identities of migrant readers; on the other, journalists and senior staff members also used their linguistic capital to cater to the sensibilities and expectations of the English-speaking segments within the Malayali migrant population. It is thus through reconciling the seemingly contradictory tasks of maintaining the "logic of difference" (Udupa, 2015, p. 26) and actualizing the shared imaginations between language communities that vernacular news media function today in an increasingly global and digital world.

Notes

[1] The term vernacular is often associated—particularly in cultural theory—with being "non-institutional," but following Howard (2008), this study rejects the idea of a singular or authentic vernacular, as in the digital age vernacular grows along both the institutional and non-institutional axes.

[2] This preference for economic and political themes is an upshot of adherence to Enlightenment values, which traditionally foreground rationality and science over language, culture, and religion. See, for example, Rajagopal (2019). Moreover, in addition to cultural capital, there is also the prevalence in journalism studies of the even broader term "social capital," from which economic, cultural, and other forms of capitals are derived (Higgins Joyce and Harlow, 2020).

[3] Even though the Malayalam language is spoken by less than 3 percent of the population in India, *MM* is the daily with the second highest circulation in the country, surpassing the leading English-language newspaper *The Times of India* (Census of India, 2011). In the Middle East, *MM* is regarded as the Malayalam-language newspaper with the second highest readership, behind *Gulf Madhayam*.

[4] According to the Indian Readership Survey (2019), *MM* is the fifth-highest circulated daily in India.

[5] This is also supported, to some extent, through the interviews in which my informants claimed that much of *MM*'s profits came from its operations in India, and the Middle East editions were largely established for "branding purposes."

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